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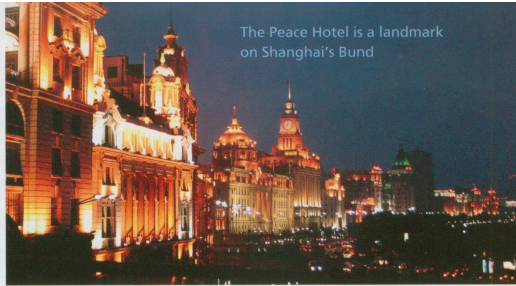
By Barbara Perkins

In the smoky basement bar of the Shanghai Peace Hotel, the drinks are weak, the cover charge is hefty and the wait staff is surly. The low ceiling and back lighting in the historic Art Deco hotel's bar make the experience nothing less than surreal. But the ancient jazz band that has been playing here for decades makes it worth the trip.

Shanghai's love affair with jazz is nothing new. It was all the rage in the 1920s and 1930s, and then again after World War II, when the city was filled with hip nightclubs and acclaimed as the jazz capital of the East.

Back then rich Chinese, students, and American expats and soldiers were regulars at the bar in the former Cathay Hotel, built in 1929 by millionaire bon vivant Victor Sassoon and still standing proud on the banks of the Huangpu River at the corner of the Bund and Nanjing Lu. But beginning in the '50s, all that ended. Music of all kinds, especially Western-influenced jazz, was deemed decadent entertainment. Dance halls were closed down in Shanghai and jazz was essentially banned. It wasn't until the thaw of the '80s when the Cathay (renamed the Peace Hotel) set up the Old Jazz Band that the music returned. And not just the music: Many of the original band members were called out of retirement to revive the good old days and attract a new generation of tourists. And so, live jazz reappeared.

Well, jazz of a sort. The musicians, many of whom started out when jazz was virtually nonexistent except in the West, apparently honed their skills mimicking songs they heard in the movies. The geriatric sextet of two saxophones, trumpet, piano, bass, and drums



The Peace Hotel is a landmark on Shanghai's Bund

- it's hard to pinpoint the age of some of the players - doesn't really come to life until they get a request from the patrons. For the most part, lacking any boundary-stretching improvisations, they steadily plod through house standards including "New York, New York" and "The Girl from Ipanema." Not exactly Miles, Duke or Coltrane.

But each table carries a menu of songs to request, everything from "Satin Doll" to "Georgia On My Mind," and laced with off-the-mark translations of such favorites as "My Left Heart is in San Francisco." Bringing to mind the adage that money talks, for a few RMB the band will strike up the tune of choice and let it rip, belting out a rendition that would make Tony Bennett proud.

These days the hotel itself could use a few improvements, though that is certainly not the case with its gilded Deco lobby or its German-style bar. Unchanged since it first opened, the bar is dark and gloomily lit, which actually makes it the perfect place to hear the venerable sextet. The Peace Hotel is a throwback in time, as are the band members, but if you're looking for a sentimental journey, this is the watering hole to stop by. ■

Peace Hotel, 20 Nanjing Lu, Huangpu District. shanghaipeacehotel.com

Sentimental Journey

For a timeless experience, go and catch some Bebop at Shanghai's historic Peace Hotel



Photo by Christian Were